

Strategic shift: China's Military Expansion and its Consequences

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The Chinese economy became vigorous since 1980s, and both the state and private capitalists had accumulated huge amount of capital. By the end of the 20th century, Chinese capitalism commenced its overseas expansion. In 1999, the government initiated the 'Go Out Policy' (also referred to as the 'Going Global Strategy') to promote Chinese investments abroad. The effort was remarkable. According to statistics published by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) [1], China's outbound foreign direct investment (OFDI) in 2000 was only US\$915.8 million; but in 2013, the year when China announced the One Belt and One Road Initiative (OBOR), this figure had increased dramatically to reach US\$107,843.7 million.

American journalist Thomas Friedman famously wrote: "The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist. McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the designer of the US Air Force F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies to flourish is called the US Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps." History has repeatedly showed that military forces were indispensable to the overseas expansion of capital. And China is no exception.

Great Navy Build-up

The regime of the Chinese Communist Party always values its military, but in the past the central tasks of the PLA were to guard its land territory and maintain internal stability. Thus for a long time the development of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) had been a lesser priority. For example, throughout the 1990s, in despite of that the Chinese economy was booming rapidly, the PLAN only had four new destroyers (destroyers were considered the main battle ships in the PLAN) entering active service. This is because the major role of the PLAN was to obstruct enemies from landing on China's coastal provinces, which could be carried out by green-water fleets consisting of small battle ships. However, along with the expansion of its overseas interests, especially with the

start of OBOR, Beijing's attitude towards navy has shifted significantly.

On December 26, 2008, a small fleet of two destroyers and one replenishment ship departed from a navy base in Sanya for Somalia. Their mission was to participate in the anti-pirate campaign in the Gulf of Aden, which was authorized by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Admiral Wu Shengli, who was the commander of the PLAN at that time, said this was the first time for China to use military force to protect its national strategic interests overseas, as well as the first time for the PLAN to perform humanitarian obligations overseas [2].

But Beijing is not satisfied with an ocean fleet that can only carry out escort mission. Along with the increase of China's "strategic interests overseas", especially the mega construction and infrastructure projects that Chinese capital invests in, the state has to make more and more effort to protect its domains, assets and personnel from various threats—not only from light-weapon-equipped pirates, but also from rival states that have modernized blue-water navies. As said in China's 2013 defense white paper [3]:

"In line with the requirements of its offshore defense strategy, the PLAN endeavors to accelerate the modernization of its forces for comprehensive offshore operations, develop advanced submarines, destroyers and frigates, and improve integrated electronic and information systems. Furthermore, it develops blue-water capabilities of conducting mobile operations, carrying out international cooperation, and countering non-traditional security threats, and enhances its capabilities of strategic deterrence and counterattack."

Moreover, the unyielding nationalistic stand is a crucial part of the propaganda that boosts Xi's authority and popularity. Even just for fulfilling his declarations such as 'we cannot lose even one inch of the territory left behind by our ancestors', which was made during a meeting with U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis earlier this year, Beijing also have to build more battle ships.

The result is the second largest navy (in terms of tonnage) in the world. China has built more than 100 warships and submarines in the last decade. The PLAN now has a total of 317 warships and submarines in active service, which outnumbers the 283 of the U.S. navy. And this is an on-going trend. At least two aircraft carriers and eight Type 055 'super destroyers'—which are as big as the cruisers of the U.S. navy, are under construction at the time of writing this article.



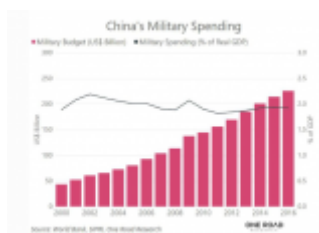
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Picture Above: the formation of the Liaoning—China's first aircraft carrier, at sea in April 2018. Source: The New York Times. Agence France-Presse—Getty Images.

The Militarization of the Region

Although the technology and capability of China's blue-water fleet have not been tested in actual combat, its stupendous size still gives Beijing the confidence to act aggressively. One example is the construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea and the relevant naval frictions around them.

China's military build-up and aggressiveness inevitably has exacerbated the arms race in this region. In 2017, South Korea increased its defense spending by 4%, hitting a record of US\$36.5 billion. Japan also signed an unprecedented defense budget of US\$48 billion for the next year, while Prime Minister Abe has set a 2020 deadline for revising Article 9 of the Constitution. The other regional players who are vigorously sharpening their gears include India, Taiwan, Australia and Vietnam.



Nevertheless, the strongest response comes from the United States. Actually, in order to contain China, the Obama administration had already planned the so-called 'pivot to Asia' strategy as early as in 2012, which included redeploying 60 percent of the US Navy to the region. However, ongoing crises in the Middle East delayed the materialization of this plan. Although Trump has overthrown many of Obama's policies, he continues and enhanced the military hostility to China. As said in the 2018 National Defense Strategy [4]:

"China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage. As China continues its economic and military ascendance, asserting power through an all-of-nation long-term strategy, it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future..."

In May 2018, America renamed the U.S. Pacific Command to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, which interpreted by analysts as a change to counter China's influence in this region. Now nearly 60 per cent of the US surface ships and over 60 per cent of US submarines have been deployed in this region.

America's Containment

American imperialism has been declining since the first decade of the new century due to a range of factors—military disasters in Iraq and Afghanistan, global financial crisis and the Great Recession triggered by it, Arab Revolution, the rise of regional powers who have their own sub-imperialist agendas, etc. At the same time China has maintained relatively rapid economic growth—it even sustained its boom during the Great Recession through hyper-stimulation. Furthermore, with the vast amount of capital it accumulated, China embarked on the road of global expansion. Facing this situation, America initially hoped to subordinate China through incorporating it into the neoliberal world order. However, China's strategic decision makers interpreted this as a gesture of yield; then they concluded that it was time to construct a new world order. Of course the Chinese ruling class is not too naïve to think America will peacefully accept the new order, but it did not expect that the counter-attack would come so soon.

OBOR stimulates America to accelerate its pace to contain China, because this strategy is designed to help the latter to intrude into the traditional spheres of influence of the former such as Southeast Asia and the Middle East. The 2016 election victory of Trump, who was a fierce critic of China during his election campaign, to some extent reflected this attitude. According to *South China*

Morning Post, during a recent dinner with 13 CEOs and senior White House staff at his private golf club, Trump told his guests that OBOR was ‘insulting’ and he didn’t want it—he also proclaimed that he had said the same to Xi’s face [5]. America’s newest defense white paper describes China as ‘a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea’. And its writer, Trump’s Defense Secretary Mattis, stressed in May this year that the Indo-Pacific region ‘has many belts and many roads’ and is ‘open to investment and free, fair and reciprocal trade, not bound by any nation’s predatory economics or threat of coercion’.

At this moment Trump obviously prefers to use economic means to suppress China. So far America’s new tariffs announced during this year’s trade war have applied to over \$250 billion of Chinese goods, roughly half the amount China sells to America. Trump also threatened tariffs on an additional \$267 billion worth of imports if China retaliates.

Apart from this kind of comprehensive offense, America also launched targeted attack on China’s military department. On September 21, it imposed sanctions on the Equipment Development Department (EDD) of China’s Central Military Commission (CMC) and its responsible personnel. The accusation is that EDD engaged in military trade transactions with the Russian companies that have been sanctioned by a US law passed last year [6]. The measures of the sanctions mainly include: denying export licenses, excluding from foreign exchange trade under the US jurisdiction, prohibiting from the US financial system, freezing all assets and interests held in the US, and implementing sanctions against the heads of the EDD, including visa bans.

Although this won’t sabotage the deals of Su-35 fighter and S-400 surface-to-air missile system between China and Russia, it will be hard for China to purchase military-related products from US and its allies in the future. And China’s reaction to the sanctions on ZTE, which occurred earlier this year, exposed that China is far from achieving self-sufficiency in high-tech products. Moreover, probably many high rank officials in the PLA and the government are now worried about the safety of their wealth in America.

Trump’s strategy is not something new. For example from the end of 1930s, the Roosevelt administration implemented a series of sanctions and export bans on Japan to cut its supplies of essential military materials, such as aircraft, aviation motor fuels and steel scrap. The economic pressure became an important reason for Japan to start the war with America.

But China will be unlikely to initiate a war with America in the near future. Even if only considering the military aspect, the latter still has huge advantage over China—F-35 fighter, Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carrier, Zumwalt class destroyer and Virginia-class submarine are all unmatched by the peer weapons of the PLAN; let alone the gap between the two sides’ practical combat experiences and command systems. So we don’t need to worry about another Jutland or Pearl Harbor at this moment.



USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN-78), the super aircraft carrier which is at least two generations advanced than the Liaoning.

Oppose the Imperialist Competition

Nevertheless, no order is permanent. China's capitalism development will gradually narrow the gap of military strengths between the PLA and the US Armed forces, thereby consolidating the Chinese ruling class' imperialist ambitions.

If a war does break out, the ordinary Chinese people will definitely become victims. Just as what happened during the titanic struggles between rival imperial powers in the last century such as World War I, World War II and the Cold War, parents from lower social classes would be forced to send their sons and daughters to slaughters, civil rights such as freedom of speech would be further deprived, labor strikes would be strictly banned, dissidents would be accused of treason, the prices of food and other daily necessities would skyrocket and civilians would be injured or killed by air strikes. The list can go on and on.

As the biggest imperialist power in this region and in the world, America must be the first to be blamed for this dangerous situation. However, we also have to recognize that China's enthusiastic military expansion for challenging and even replacing the former's dominance has increased the risk of war. Thus, no side is less evil, and people in both countries should [oppose] this imperialist competition and the relevant military build-up.

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https://borderlessmovement.wordpress.com/2018/10/11/chinas-military-expansion-and-its-consequences/?preview_id=6937&preview_nonce=dd7254ee51&post_format=standard&_thumbnail_id=6938&preview=true

Footnotes

[1] <https://unctad.org/en/Pages/DIAE/World%20Investment%20Report/Annex-Tables.aspx>

[2] http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2008-12/26/content_1188602_2.htm

[3] <http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/files/library/ARF%20Defense%20White%20Papers/China-2013.pdf>

[4] <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

[5] <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2158869/trump-rails-against-china-during-dinner-executives>

[6] http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-09/26/content_9298742.htm